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ABSTRACT

It is difficult for newspaper editors and reporters to maintain journalistic objectivity when covering a city's urban structure and development because of their traditional civic involvement and because of a civic ideology shared with urban experts and chamber of commerce boosters. News values and editorial policy are often implicit varieties of civic propaganda. The subjective metaphor is most evident in the presentation, protection, and defense of the central business district as the place for civic worship of sacred icons, relics, and ceremonies. City planning news policy combines media and civic self-interest wrapped in the ethos of social responsibility and public interest. The civic ideology affects definitions and interpretations of urban problems and sets the news agenda throughout the newspaper. Journalists tend to justify their subjective involvement (if they admit to it) as a means of promoting civic identity and consensus; but in fact it leads to the reporting of some debatable events as nonpolitical, for the common good, and closed to debate. As civic custodians of civic symbols, civic pride, and a city's reputation, the participant-observer press often blends its fate mutually with that of the community. (Author/GT)

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QUALITATIVE STUDIES DIVISION

OBJECTIVITY AND CIVIC IDEOLOGY: POLICY AND FERFORMANCE DILEMMAS

by

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Introduction

Although internal, organizational forces influence the making[1] and manufacturing[2] of news, there are external ideological forces outside the newsroom, although "journalists are not much interested in ideology or aware that they, too, promulgate ideology".[3]

While it has been argued that news comes from "nowhere" since it is created largely from inside bureaucratic media needs and routine, it has also been suggested that in one part of the outside "somewhere", that "Rules and guides for journalistic reporting and interpretation of urban problems appear to have grown out of the shared civic ideology of the press and other participants and promoters of the city."[5]

If one can accept the notion that perhaps the modern city is a model of society, then the kinds of social forces that have some control inside the newsroom[6], might be pursued outside toward the civic dogma and doctrine which move editors and communities to action and causes. To suggest that journalism is a cult or an "ism" may shock those bathed in their own cult of objectivity, but "Of course, there is nothing new particularly about the journalist as missionary. It is a quality imbedded deep in American thought."[7]

There are indications that on news of city growth, planning and renewal, the press is less concerned with truth, information and knowledge than with providing ideological support for civic canons and creeds promoting a "good" community and public interest mutually defined by press and community. This seems most evident in (1) the power of media to create and perpetuate a visual image of the city; (2) in the participant/observer activity of journalists; and (3) in the urban journalism practices and policies of metropolitan media, especially newspapers. All these areas present dilemmas for the concept of news objectivity.

Visual Images as Civic "Needia"

If the beginning of the world was the "Word", then perhaps the beginning of the large, modern city was the "Photo" -- the bird's-eye-view of the metropolis which the individual needs to "experience" the community through media rather than through personal contact. This image and vista of the city shaped by the media[8] makes citizens somewhat dependent on the symbolic vision of others, and makes the nature of the metropolitan experience a given condition.

Historically, cities have been places of symbolic communion in a sacred and religious experience, as "city people have been characterized by their readiness and willingness to participate in symbolic interaction rather than to deal with substantive environments."[9] The city's architecture is also a form of communication,[10] which further shapes and frames personal experience and limits and defines community. Such symbols mediate, encourage a civic faith and tend to narrow the boundaries of debate on the nature of the city.

Even further borders are marked as external images are internalized as the mental life adjusts to the metropolis,[11] as the geography of the mind[12] and city[13] are shaped in mental maps[14] and the city of the head.[15] The most common single image of community emanates from the buildings of the central business district where media are frequently located. From that locus, the ideological tone of the city is sounded:[16]

> "...as gatekeeper of the civic symbols and custodian of the civic relics, the press is the city's civic salesman and press agent who points with pride or cries with shame and alarm. It reminds the public of the central business district as the city with civic superlatives: the centerpiece, the showcase, the crown jewels, the face and facade, the newest, the biggest, the tallest, the longest, the largest, the cleanest, the safest, and the greatest. Central area builders and buildings are idolized throughout the seasons and in all weather as news photographers capture the skyscrapers in the civic stereotype."

From ground-breaking to the topping-out with the traditional tree, the building and photographic boasting of these modern temples reaching skyward to heaven are often an exercise in non-rational sentiment and symbolism rather than rational land usage.[17] Images of these artifacts become a type of civic shorthand[18] to provide a sense of place, and a window frame to identify with the city.[19]

Such images are constantly reinforced in skyline photographs on page one or on TV news screens as the stained glass of civic worship, the place for civic icons and ceremonies, and the symbols to be protected and defended against outsiders who would smear or slander them.[20] These symbols take on a religious meaning as absolutes and superlatives. City images in the press show a marked similarity to religious archetypes and hierophanies as the "urban temple" is related to the sky, water, sacred stones, places and times, and to emotions, awe and reverence.[21]

Hope by both media and society is often tied to the image of the skyscraper. Some Christian paintings forecast Christ's Second Coming from above the skyline.* When the new morning tabloid The Trib appeared in New York in January 1978, its cover was the Manhattan skyscrapers with the following cutlines of hope and civic faith:[22]

> "A NEW DAY, A NEW YEAR -- and A NEW NEWSPAPER...This is a bright bright dawn in New York, a burst of sunlight that could begin to dissipate the dark moments of the old, frazzled events that have beset us. Nowhere on earth is there a city with such limitless vitality, such an enormous concentration of talent and such rich resources.....in treasure and people. Old illnesses must be cured. The dedication is here. And its urban pioneers such as Mayor Koch, are here. See "Our First Day"...What the Trib is About" and our editorial: "For All Our Sakes -- Go Ed, Go!"

The city's visual images are often assigned religious meanings when the press makes the skyline sacred. Church spires are shown reaching for sunlight (Milwaukee Journal, Jan. 7, 1977): Lightning

strikes sturdy skyscrapers like "A 'hot line' from the heavens" (Chicago Sun-Times, Apr. 20, 1963); Skyline scenes are used to reveal "The Heavenly Secrets" (Chicago Tribune, April 28, 1963) and to show "The Heavens Declare the Glory of God...and the Firmament Shows His Handiwork" (August 14, 1960); Skylines have been shown with the "crowning glory" of the sun's halo (Corpus Christi Caller-Times, Jan. 26, 1980); as "Living in a corner of heaven..." (On Austin, Texas, in Time magazine); as Christmas trees with stars crowning the city in "...this glorious hour of the city..." (Chicago Daily News, Dec. 21, 1961); as city hall Nativity scenes (Denver Post, Dec. 23, 1975); and at Easter when "There was Darkness Over all the Land" (Chicago American, Apr. 20, 1962).

Even in smoggy Houston, where the Chronicle reports the skyline is "always impressive", at sunset, "it became almost mystical." (Aug. 13, 1977.)

One notion is that such structures marking the skies are a form of "concrete theology", as witness an architectural commentary on the Dallas-Fort Worth airport:[23]

> "The irrationality of DFW's design and its ultimate triumph over its ostensible purpose suggest an outbreak of religious fervor, a cultish exultation. (It)...is the flat, horizontal, commercial church of a Texas cargo cult. It expresses the same faith that inspired Melanesian worshippers to slaughter their precious pig and erect mock telegraph systems of bamboo and rope, in the belief that soon Great Pigs would appear from the sky, signalling the onset of a South Pacific millenium."

The ideological potential for the electronic media may go beyond that of the print imagery. The TV vision of the earth from the moon was not only a religious experience for those up there, but a visual awakening on earth. The new imagery on the newer medium had a profound

effect on environmental awareness and enlightenment,[24] and the religious aspects of TV imagery became more obvious.

TV's power to portray both urban and earthly imagery helps to unite community in a tribal ritual, performs the functions of pre-industrial religions, replaces the historical nexus of church and state, and is "the dream of every emperor and pope".[25] As the new religion, TV has been wed to sports, also defined as a religion,[26] and the two together (television sports) have been called also a new religion.[27] The result is a new urban civic bond,[29] in which the growth, planning and renewal of cities is interwoven. "If one were to come from another planet and look down on the earth, he would see two distinctive buildings in all cities, a skyscraper and a stadium...."[29] Minister Norman Vincent Peale said "if Jesus were alive today, he'd be going to the Super Bowl" to see the symbolic clash of two competing cities.[30]

In such arenas, one finds the civic ideology magnified through media focus on city mascots, colors, songs, heroes, and the ritual of the "Big Leagues" and the editorial "We" against "Them" who compete for favor in the money and media markets. In the past, people communicated "through identification with their church tower; today, our shared experience is watching Elvis Presley or a baseball game on television."[31]

Vote-seeking mayors identify with winning local teams which "brought this town together like it's never been brought together before";[32] and presidential candidates hug winning Olympic athletes on the White House steps before millions on TV; while a visiting pope is baptized by a self-censoring press in "an air of make-believe" in compliance with the national mood as the press "became an unthinking part of the event."[33]

Not only presidents and popes, framed in sacred civic ceremonials, escape media scrutiny, but even so-called straight TV news is a form of religion and community worship. It is a ritual "not meant to burden the mind with facts and information or to shock it with novel observation; rather, it is intended as a respite from individual speculation, a stylized assurance that there is stability and sameness in the world on which the tribe can depend."[34]

Press as Civic Participant and Observer

If the image and media are difficult to separate, it is also often difficult to distinguish between journalists as participants in the civic scene and as observers. Publishers, editors, station managers and others are often a form of civic leader with ideological links to the outside community from which they like to think they are separate as objective bystanders. Nevertheless, there is a long history of the role of the press in city growth, planning and renewal,[35] and in recent years an array of studies which show the press is a fourth branch of government,[36] and that there are severe editorial dilemmas related to the subjective role of the press in the local community.[37]

The press does not like to be reminded that it is just another power in the community and not the mythical adversary of the official government.[38] Rare press revelations of its own conflicts of interest tend to reflect self interest,[39] and to surprise the media industry.[40] Even revelations of the complex interlocking community powers of the media by journalism reviews are subject to potential retaliation.[41]

There are numerous historic examples of how earlier publishers were often types of city planners who were activists frequently involved in decisions on site selections for community projects and the selection of political candidates. The current best seller The

Powers That Be by David Halberstam tells how the Los Angeles Times is inseparable from the urban development of Los Angeles. Similar examples include that of the Nelsons in Kansas City, Dealey in Dallas, and Jones in Houston.[42]

In recent years, publishers may have become more cautious about enrolling the staff of newspapers to support public projects because of the newer claims of objectivity by newsmen, but there remain publishers influencing working newsmen to support their pet community projects as in the building of special civic halls in Chicago and Denver.[43] In addition, working journalists get caught up in newsroom boosterism on newspapers that behaved "like publishing arms of the chamber of commerce."[44]

The dual task of the newspaper as a participant and observer is justified by many publishers as a public service for community "good". This service is often duly recorded in flattering terms in biographies and memoirs and rewarded in prizes for community "improvements". For professional journalists, a participant role is supported more often than a neutral role.[45] It is not uncommon for newsmen to "moonlight" in writing for community service publications like chamber magazines, whose ideology may overlap with that in the daily, objective press.[46]

One way that the press has justified civic involvement is to plead that in times of crisis, differences might be lessened for the common good. In the 1960s, there was often a "marriage" between the press and city hall on their mutual fate in the central city facing deterioration.[47] Urban renewal of downtowns was a place where the press, experts (both private and governmental), and the central city governments joined to make projects succeed.[48]

In the 1970s, the lead for the environmental movement was taken by the smaller mini-media and then adopted as a worthy crusade by the mass media as long as the major pseudo-events created news. There is some hint that the urban movement of the Sixties had greater support and participation by the daily press because it concerned renewal of the city and press economic base, whereas the more suburban, rural environmental movement was somewhat removed geographically, and was a challenge to the growth ethic that "bigger is better".[49]

Although mayors are not often local editors as they once were, the newer electronic journalists such as weather and sports announcers do run for office and national news announcers "anchor" the nation as much as political leaders, in terms of credibility, which is often more significant than the rationality of debate. Seeing becomes believing as participants and observers are merged, much as image and media are blended in the civic ideology of visual imagery.

Urban Journalism and Dilemmas of Objectivity

Civic boosterism moves citizens to act, to care, and to believe in community and to cheer the civic team rather than criticize,[50] as "knowledge reveals the truth while ideology skews truth to move people to action."[51] This involvement[52] is often justified with a typical publisher rationale of action in the general public interest, but that is often a mixture of vague, loosely defined, implied social responsibility.[53]

One observation is that news values are "para-ideology", which is "an aggregate of only partly-thought-out values which is neither entirely consistent nor well integrated; and...changes somewhat over time, (and) it is also flexible on some issues".[54] The tone of city growth, planning and renewal news is one of hope and self-full-

filling prophecy.[55] It is poetry as much as polemic. Civic superlatives may become an antidote to negative news, with a balance of good and bad news resulting.[56]

Issues are often presented as non-political, therefore not to be debated, which may hide an implicit policy and neglect the realities of economic and political pressures unavoidable in conflict and controversy. Civic ends are less questioned than the means to obtain them. The civic cliches of urban "needs" and "development" and "improvements" prevent criticism of sacred civic cows. Bond issues must pass for the growth of the city, which means civic propaganda for our own town.[57]

Urban affairs writers often practice as thermometers of the civic agenda of crisis. Conflict is marketed as social responsibility often after civic leaders have decided on what's good for the city, as they and the press define both. Urban crisis often ushers in emphasis on urban journalism.[58] Training of journalists is also geared to the forms of the media establishment rather than to functions in community.[59]

Urban reporters tend to be bulletin boards for the urban growth establishment, although critics and specialists which first appeared in the late Fifties are now more common.[60] The need for new critics in the urban and environmental area is emerging as the concept is evolving from the limited fine arts critics to other areas once off limits.[61]

One of the greatest needs is for a re-organization of newsrooms to accommodate urban specialists covering urban functions and beats rather than being merely dependent on sources, buildings and places experienced by newsmen, but not necessarily experienced by people in the community.[62] Along with this is needed a new definition of community,[63] and eventually an explicit urban news policy which is not a mere reproduction and legitimizing of the status quo.

Until that takes place, the traditional and primitive relationships between newsmen and city planners and urban experts is one of dependence by the press.[64] Reporters often lack expertise, planning is seen automatically as "good" for the city, glossy planning models appear impressive, and the mass audience can "see" them or the televised controversies over their implementation.

Planners still control much of the activities of the general assignment reporter dependent on meetings, press releases, interviews, while the ill-defined beat is subject to public reactions via pickets, protests, petitions, and other feedback, which the naturally defensive expert counters with more of his own pseudo-events. Here, the para-ideology blooms as a frustrated, apathetic public is caught between belief in an objective press and the subjective nature of controversy. Instead of being educated to debate the rationality of urban issues, the general public is faced with a clash between whom and what to believe. Credibility becomes more important than rationality.

Conclusions/Summary

If the press insists it is a God of Objectivity while its image-power and participation transfer ideology that may limit ideas and inquiry, then the myth of objectivity might be questioned, maybe abandoned. If the press is critical and if its myths are exposed, it may disturb both publics and journalists.

As cities grow larger and people become more dependent on "media-tion" of their environment and substitute symbols for experience,[66] participant/observer concepts of press leadership may face challenge as to whether it can be "performed without prejudice to the newspaper's independence in its newsgathering function".[67] If that idea of independence remains "not subject for bargaining even in behalf of worthwhile civic aims",[68] then the working newsman is in for even more dilemmas.

If the newer electronic knowledge/journalists (e.g. weather and sports-caster) can turn away from vicarious, symbolic civic boosterism and adapt more "preventive journalism", information might be used to prevent the crises defined as news. (Superlatives of disaster and failure may be less useful than the wind chill factor, humidity index and pollution counts.)

If media impart more knowledge which people can use and experience rather than mere ideology for them to believe, then perhaps communities can become less dependent on the priests of media and create their own communications systems and free the media from the heavenly burden of objectivity.

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